

HEAVENLY SIGHT

An Artemis Media and Murray Street Production

with David Bailes, Flyleaf Creative, and Medium Rare Creative

Distributed by PRI -- Public Radio International February , 2012

Support for Heavenly Sight and HeavenlySight.org has come from the Alabama State Council on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts. Art works.

Additional Support from this station, Public Radio International stations, and the PRI Program Fund. Contributors include The Ford Foundation and The John D and Catherine T MacArthur Foundation.

Our Deepest Appreciation to Phil Susswein, Vanessa Egel, and the home of The Brooklyn Gospel Queens, FatCatMusic.org. They led nearly three hundred Heavenly Sight backers who came to us through Kickstarter.com, a new way to find, fund and follow creativity.

Jimmy Carter:

My mom and dad had six boys. We didn't have any girls and I was the youngest one and all of those guys could see except me so I did question it. I said: "Why me, why me?" but now I understand. You know, God has a way. He can see farther than we can. If I had been able to see, I doubt very seriously if I would be doing what I'm doing now.

MUSIC: The Blind Boys of Alabama, "Gospel at Colonus"

Marash:

It will always be one of the great moments of 20th Century theater, that first entrance of Jimmy Carter and the Blind Boys of Alabama, in the Award-winning musical Gospel at Colonus.

A quintet of black gospel singers who will represent, together, Oedipus, the blind and banished king, -- the greatest of all Greek tragic heroes.

MUSIC: Blind Boys of Alabama, “Stop, Do Not Go On....” from Gospel at Colonus

Marash:

What makes this startling substitution work? Lee Breuer, the director and co-creator of Gospel at Colonus, says it’s because of a linkage that audiences assume when they see blind characters on stage.

Lee Breuer:

There is a general total world historical connection between blindness and mystical insight. It has never varied culture to culture. The clearest representation of that of course in the United States is the black gospel singer, and in theater the clearest representation is Greek tragedy of 400 or 500 BC. And if you have no visual sight you have second sight. You can see God, you can see the spiritual world, you can see morality, you can see the way things work.

Marash:

This is the gift Sophocles and Oedipus, Jimmy Carter and the Blind Boys of Alabama have shared with audiences: the vision of a daily universe ordered by divinity, and of appointed messengers who put man in touch with the Gods.

Marash:

From Gospel at Colonus, The-Blind Boys of Alabama.

Jimmy Carter:

I think singing and giving out the gospel message was my calling...

Marash:

Blind Boys current lead singer Jimmy Carter :

Jimmy Carter:

...He took my sight away in order for Him to be glorified in me. You know, I feel that this is my work, this is my purpose in life: to sing His praises, tell the people about Him and try to touch somebody's life.

Marash:

From the Black Gospel Tradition, blind performers have touched singers not just of sanctified music, but blues, jazz, bluegrass, rhythm and blues – and certainly rock and roll.

From PRI Public Radio International, Artemis Media and Murray Street Productions this is *Heavenly Sight*, and I'm Dave Marash.

MUSIC: Fisk Jubilee Singers, "Ain't That Good News"

Marash:

If there were any good news for African-Americans during their years of slavery, it came from Christianity and the hymnals that sang the religion's praises, an important connection in a community deprived of education, where literacy was a rare achievement. Where few people read, word of mouth rules, especially word of mouth raised in oration or song.

The Atlanta pastor J. M Gates made over 200 recordings of song and prayer, beginning in 1926. His "Death's Black Train is Coming" sold some 35,000 copies in its first year of release.

MUSIC: JM Gates, "Death's Black Train is Coming"

Kip Lornell:

For black Americans living in the South, the church was the focal point for community life.

Marash:

Kip Lornell teaches American vernacular music at George Washington University.

Kip Lornell:

And it was a focal point not just on Sunday morning when people would come from different plantations or different homes to meet at church, but it also served as a social nexus.

If you had a problem, the pastor could for example serve as a spokesperson for the community. If you needed help with a project you might ask some of the other people in the church to help come together to build a cabin, to help out if there is some problem with the family, if you were in need of food, the church was really the central organizing social entity for black Americans well into the 20th Century.

MUSIC: Rev. DC Rice, "I'm Gonna Stay Right Here Until He Comes..."

Kip Lornell:

There's always music making of some kind. It wouldn't matter if you were in Southwest Louisiana, it could be a uh, accordion player, in Alabama where quartets were really important starting at the turn of the century it could be a quartet performing at the church. And a lot of times, of course, this material is so familiar to everybody that you might have a leader but that line between the congregation and the person who was the singer was really blurred because often everybody would join in.

Henry Butler:

It's really really wonderful to hear a whole group of people improvising and being and staying on the same wavelength.

Marash:

New Orleans native Henry Butler is known primarily as a jazz player – but you can still hear and feel the gospel in his work.

Henry Butler:

When I was a kid, I used to go to these black Baptist churches and you hear some of those types of songs are call and response songs where you say--you go and

you hear them – [singing] I love the Lord, and He heard my cry. And the congregation says: [singing] ahhh the Lord. . .

MUSIC: Clear Creek Missionary Baptist Church Congregation, “I Love the Lord”

Lee Breuer:

Before there were computers and before there were books and before there was printing you only had memory...and the only way you can remember anything really is through repetition and what aids repetition is singing.

Marash:

This is, says Gospel at Colonus creator Lee Breuer, the way things work in oral cultures, from Greece to West Africa to Northern Mississippi.

Lee Breuer:

....and so practically all lectures, sermons, you know philosophy, advice was always sung to people by the master, and it was remembered because it was sung.

MUSIC: Blind Boys of Alabama, “That Old Time Religion”

Jimmy Carter:

There old songs like Every Time I Feel the Spirit Down By the Riverside, mostly traditional stuff that everybody knew.

Marash:

This principle of oral culture, start with the traditional songs that people already know, guided the Blind Boys of Alabama when they first joined together at the Alabama Institute for the Negro Deaf and Blind as the Happy Land Jubilee Singers.

Marash:

Can you hear where James Brown comes from?

MUSIC: The Blind Boys of Alabama, "Precious Lord"

Henry Butler:

If you really listen at the music of the Five Blind Boys of Alabama, you can hear that the harmonies are quite simple, very simple, as a matter of fact, based on today's standards.

Marash:

Musician Henry Butler

Henry Butler: (continues)

You might hear...(piano) You know, those kinds of harmonies and they were great because there was so much passion coming from the singers, and the only rhythm you heard was the tapping of the feet, right? And some songs were maybe a little more sophisticated than that, but not much more. It was great for the times, and when you hear the five blind boys today, it's great, it's still great now.

MUSIC: Blind Willie Johnson, "Dark Was The Night"

David Bromberg:

It makes the hair stand up on the back of my neck. He did not articulate a single word. He hummed it and sang it and played it with a bottle neck that sounded like it was really a razor blade.

David Bromberg:

... My impression of that recording, I don't know-- it's probably worth the air it's printed on, was he was experiencing the hymn. That's the important part. And he communicated it extraordinarily, but it was his experience that made it so powerful.

Marash:

Singer-guitarist David Bromberg

Marash:

Blind Willie Johnson's "Dark Was The Night, Cold Was The Ground".

Blind Willie's career flourished in the late 1920s. He primarily sang on the streets -- usually with only his wife standing by his side. It was dangerous work.

Kip Lornell:

It would be difficult enough to be black and to be blind, but then to try to make a living as a street performer playing in the streets of Atlanta or Wichita Falls or Lynchburg or it might be in the South at the turn of the century.

MUSIC: Blind Willie Johnson, "Nobody's Fault But Mine"

Kip Lornell:

Well, when Leadbelly and Blind Lemon Jefferson were working together in East Texas in around 1912 or 1913, they had to worry about being robbed. They had to worry about being cheated. They had to worry about how they were going to get around.

Marash:

Folklorist Kip Lornell.

Kip Lornell:

When the crops were being picked in the fall and late Summer, there was some money around. When there wasn't money around then you had to go to the juke joints. In that part of the country they were called Sookie Jumps where gambling was going on, drinking was going on -- and on a Friday or Saturday night a Sookie Jump in East Texas where they were working could get a little bit dangerous.

MUSIC: Blind Willie Johnson, "If I Had My Way, I'd Tear This Building Down"

Marash:

Maybe that's what accounts for Blind Willie Johnson's unique "false bass" that raspy vocal edge – It's a "Don't mess with me" sound that added to whatever protection his holy mission and Christian music might provide him.

You'll find video, performances and interviews, and a complete list of this music and these performers -- at [Heavenly Sight.org](http://HeavenlySight.org). Our story of sight lost and vision found continues in a moment -- with Flora Moulton, Arizona Dranes, Sam Cooke and more from the Blind Boys of Alabama. From PRI -- Public Radio International, this is the Artemis Media and Murray Street production of Heavenly Sight.

I'm Dave Marash.

SEGMENT 2

MUSIC: Rev. Gary Davis, "If I Had My Way"

Marash:

From PRI – Public Radio International – this is Heavenly Sight. I'm Dave Marash. A few minutes ago we heard of the dangers faced by black, blind, street performers, even those singing God's music.

The Reverend Gary Davis, a younger disciple of Blind Willie Johnson's music, packed protection of his own, according his one-time student and "lead boy" David Bromberg.

David Bromberg:

He would get around Harlem, when he was singing in Harlem, on his own when he was doing the street singing, however his guitars were constantly being stolen from him, so one aspect of his taking care of himself was he always had a pistol and if you walked into the house and he was asleep in the chair he'd pull it on you. You know, as soon as he woke up, the first thing he did was draw a pistol.

MUSIC: Rev. Gary Davis, "Sit Down by the Banks of the River"

David Bromberg:

I was privileged to, at times, lead him in return for lessons. Instead of paying he would ask me can you lead me around, and so I took him to churches, different churches and the preaching itself had a huge influence on my playing. You listen to the phrasing and tone, the phrasing is preaching and that's the huge difference between black Blues guitar players and white Blues guitar players. White Blues guitar players don't take a breath and preachers make their notes more important by rests, playing rests.

AUDIO : REV. GARY DAVIS PREACHING

"If you want a good pastor, you can make him good by the way you handle him. Isn't that right? Then when he walk off and leave you, he wasn't any good no how. I ain't

saying you told a lie... you know what you talking about...you know so well, you didn't put nothing in the way for him to be no good..... Awwright now. Well.

MUSIC: Rev. Gary Davis, "Banks Of The River"

Marash:

The Rev. Gary Davis was a great guitarist, and a dramatic and powerful singer. But, his music was always just support for his evangelical mission.

MUSIC: Rev. Gary Davis, "*12 Gates To The City*"

David Bromberg:

It's interesting that at his funeral no one even mentioned that he played guitar. They spoke about what a great preacher he was and that was what was important to the congregation, which gave him his last rites.

MUSIC A.C. And Blind Mamie Forehand, "Wouldn't Mind Dying"

Marash:

Most of the blind black musicians singing on the streets, people like Blind Lemon Jerfferson, Willie McTell or Blind Willie Johnson were men, but there were also women working this dangerous tradition. They rarely worked alone. Blind Mamie Forehand worked with her preacher-husband, A. C.

MUSIC: Flora Molton, "I heard it through the True Vine"

Jerma Jackson:

Women evangelists are not as individuals going to street corners and evangelizing. They're doing it in groups.

Marash:

University of North Carolina cultural historian Jerma Jackson.

Jerma Jackson:

I mean there are two or three traveling together. Travel itself for a woman is not always the safest undertaking.

Marash:

Which makes Flora Molton all the more remarkable.

Bernice Johnson Reagon:

The thing about Flora Molton, if you play her music even now, you should turn it up loud because you walked into her sound.

But a block and a half to two blocks away as you move toward it, you were walking inside of Flora Molton's sound and you were breathing her air. The breath that came into you was charged by her sound.

MUSIC: Flora Molton, "Never Drive a Stranger from your door"

Marash:

Scholar and performer Bernice Johnson Reagon.

Bernice Johnson Reagon:

Now she told me that she actually took training at the Washington school for the blind and they would train you to run these stands where you could sell things but during her day they never gave those jobs to blacks so she took the corner for her job. And In the beginning, she said the police would run her off and most of the police were white and she said they would run her off and she would go back.

Reagon:

Flora Molton was a rough sister.

Marash:

Flora Molton made few records, and reached a limited audience. Especially compared to Blind Willie Johnson, to whom recordings meant a little bit of income and a lot of renown.

MUSIC: Blind Willie Johnson, “You’re Gonna Need Somebody On Your Bond”

Kip Lornell:

Financially the recordings would have meant very little because he would have been paid something like \$50 a side and not gotten any royalties.

Marash:

Folklorist Kip Lornell

Kip Lornell:

But the fact that he was a recording artist itself, man, that was a big deal back in the late 1920's if you were black and you made records for a major record company.

MUSIC: Blind Willie Johnson, “Need Somebody up and out”

MUSIC: Bessie Smith, “Graveyard Blues”

David Bromberg:

I had always thought that Bessie Smith was the biggest star of her day. She had her own railroad car. She made a lot of money.

MUSIC: Blind Willie Johnson, “Let Your Light Shine On Me”

Marash:

Guitarist David Bromberg

David Bromberg:

When they pressed Bessie Smith's albums, I mean 78's, and Blind Willy's at the same time, they would always press twice as many of Blind Willy's as they would Bessie Smith. He sold many times more records than she did.

Marash:

Before there was Blind Willie Johnson, another sightless African-American gospel musician had already hit it big on radio and records. Her name was Arizona Dranes.

MUSIC: Arizona Dranes, "My Soul is a Witness for my Lord"

Marash:

Jerma Jackson

Jerma Jackson:

She was born in Dallas, Texas somewhere between 1904 and 1906. She was blind from birth and she recorded for Okeh Records between 1928 – or no 1926 and 1929.

Jerma Jackson:

Her piano style was very, very distinctive. In fact, that was her signature sound.

MUSIC: Arizona Dranes, "I'll Go Where You Want Me to Go"

Henry Butler:

I have heard sort of bits and pieces of a lot of people playing like that, especially in what we used to call sanctified churches. On the verse when she was doing this [piano music] I was reminded of what tuba players might play if they were marching in a parade in New Orleans or something like that.

Marash: Pianist Henry Butler.

Butler: (continues)

and the thing is you don't always know what's coming next and I dare say that she didn't probably also know what was going to happen next, but it always worked.

MUSIC: Arizona Dranes, "He is My Story"

Jerma Jackson:

I interviewed some elderly women from Chicago who vividly recalled, hearing Arizona Dranes play in the 1920's

Marash:

Jerma Jackson

Jerma Jackson:

And they didn't just remember that she played. They remembered how she played. She would sit in her seat, stand up, turn around, sit back down and continue to play as though nothing had ever intervened. And for a blind singer, that's a gift. They remembered that in 1993. And for a religious audience, they were seeing God at work because she was demonstrating God's work right-before their eyes.

Marash:

As early as the 1920's, recordings and radio stations had harnessed the power of the music. Youngsters like Jimmy Carter and his fellow students at the Alabama Institute could learn from the latest gospel groups like The Soul Stirrers.

MUSIC: Soul Stirrers, "When the Morning Comes"

Marash:

... and The Fairfield Four...

MUSIC: The Fairfield Four, "Don't Drive Away"

Marash:

and most popular of all, The Golden Gate Singers.

MUSIC: The Golden Gate Singers, “Jezebel”

Jimmy Carter:

They had a program every afternoon at 4:00 called Echoes of the South

Marash:

Radio and records not only brought black music to black audiences, they brought black music to white ears across America, as well. But the biggest white audiences were for secular music, so gospel singers were urged to cross over. Even the Golden Gates did so, although usually with songs that at least had a patriotic mission.

MUSIC: Golden Gate Singers, “Stalin wasn’t Stallin’”

MUSIC: Soul Stirrers, “Touch the Hem of His Garment”

Marash:

In the mid 1950s Sam Cooke, of the Soul Stirrers, became first, the biggest star in gospel – then, shocked his church audiences by setting the stage for a new pop music called soul .

MUSIC: Sam Cooke, “A Change Is Gonna Come”

Marash:

Cooke’s secular smash hits like “You Send Me,” ” *Summertime*” and “*Chain Gang*” would open the door for Bobby Womack, “little” Stevie Wonder, Aretha Franklin and a host of other gospel singers turned pop stars.

Jimmy Carter:

Well you know The Blind Boys, all of us were brought up in a Christian environment

Marash:

Jimmy Carter

Jimmy Carter:

...and we determined that we would never deviate from our gospel roots. Now when Sam Cooke decided to change and go over to R&B, we were in the studio at the same time. We were offered the same deal that he was offered but he accepted it, we turned it down. We told the guys that we were gospel singers and we were going to stay that way.

MUSIC: Blind Boys of Alabama, "Servant's Prayer Amen"

Ray Charles:

One of my great influences was the church, so naturally, when I started to sing in my own way in my style, naturally that influence came out, just like the blues in me came out.

MUSIC: Ray Charles, "What'd I Say"

Ray Charles: (continues)

Some people felt that oh he's bastardizing religion and all, but you know, after a while the next thing I know everybody was doing it, and they start calling it soul music, I say uh-huh!

Marash:

Perhaps the greatest of the gospel-styled soul singers, Ray Charles.

Our story of sight that is lost and vision that is found continues in a moment—with Larscene Turk, Valerie Capers, and more from The Blind Boys of Alabama.

From Murray Street Productions and Artemis Media, this is Heavenly Sight.

You'll find video, performances and interviews, and a list of all the music in our program at HeavenlySight.org.-

I'm Dave Marash.

This is PRI, Public Radio International.

SEGMENT 3

Jimmy Carter:

I remember it as if it were yesterday and when I got up there they took me to the principal's office to register me and when they left me up there I thought the world had come to an end because I didn't know nobody, seven year old boy among strangers. It was a real rough time for me at that time.

Marash:

The whole world has changed in the past 70 years, but for the blind and visually handicapped, expectations and opportunities are a world away from Alabama's School for the Negro Deaf and Blind that Jimmy Carter attended in 1939.

MUSIC: Blind Boys of Alabama, "Alone and Motherless"

Marash:

From PRI, Public Radio International, This is Heavenly Sight: I'm Dave Marash. What helped smooth things for Jimmy Carter at the Blind School, was music.

Jimmy Carter:

It was one of the main courses. We had piano, guitar, voice. It wasn't the main thing, I take that back. Vocation was the main thing that they were interested in. The only real opportunity that the blind people had back then with any education was caning chairs, making brooms and mops, just physical hand stuff.

Marash:

No wonder Jimmy Carter, Clarence Fountain, Johnny Fields, George Scott, and Ollice Thomas -- the *Five Blind Boys* -- chose music.

But, by the early sixties, when Larscene Turk attended that same school, choices and horizons were expanding.

MUSIC: Larscene Turk, "God's Amazing Grace"

Larscene Turk:

So I didn't get exposure to the manual things, trade oriented at that time. I, you know, started off learning Braille and really how to count and how to write with what they call a slate and awl. To me that was a major accomplishment that I was able to write something in code, feel something with my fingers and found that it was making sense, and I was then able, each time I would go home to at least talk to them on a much higher level about words and beginning to make sentences and what have you. So my expectations then were beginning to rise.

MUSIC: Larscene Turk, "Hold On Help Is On The Way"

Marash:

Today, in addition to singing, Larscene Turk runs the Birmingham regional center for the Alabama Institute for the Deaf and Blind.

Marash:

Valerie Capers was blessed, she says, after losing her sight at age 6, to be sent to the New York Institute for the Education of the Blind.

Valerie Capers:

It was a school that provided an education for me that my parents could never have afforded. It was really almost having a rich girl's education.

MUSIC: Valerie Capers, "Rhythm-a-ming"

Marash:

Valerie more than fulfilled her preparation at the New York Institute when she was admitted to study music at Julliard. But it wasn't easy-- for her or for the school.

Valerie Capers:

That was quite a challenge: It didn't matter if you had the highest marks possible, the institutions were afraid of having you come to the school because they thought, for one thing, they would be open to a liability if a blind person hurt themselves in some way, had an accident. Believe it or not there were people who felt uncomfortable about having a person with a disability, a blind person around. They weren't too happy about that.

MUSIC: Henry Butler, "St. Louis Blues"

Marash:

This was in the 1960's, when the Civil Rights and Human Rights Movements were opening up opportunities for Black Americans, but Henry Butler says, even then, one of this teachers tried to make his comfort zone into Henry's prison.

Henry Butler:

One guy when I was a junior in high school brought me in and we did a battery of tests and he told me, he said: you know, you did very well on your tests and especially the reasoning part, whatever that meant, and then he said but I would like to see you do something with your hands rather than going to college, I'd rather see you be a piano tuner.

Marash: Then in college, at Michigan State University...

Henry Butler:

I wanted to be in some of the operas since I was a voice major and they advised me not to do that because I was blind and I wouldn't know the layout of stage. Then, well, then just show me. It could have been done, but I had teachers that were afraid of that.

Marash:

Still Henry says, the good teaching he got at the then-still-segregated Louisiana School for African-American Children, helped make him what he is today.

Henry Butler:

They made us work harder. They understood that we had to work twice as hard in the kind of environment that we were in. So they stayed on us. It was like tough love almost all the time. It was hard to take sometimes, you know, but all these blind people taught these kids with care, with the understanding that it's not easy out there, especially in those days, it wasn't easy.

MUSIC: Henry Butler, "Basin St. Blues"

Marash:

In recent years, Henry Butler has turned teacher himself, creating music programs in Indiana and Louisiana, and learning how blind children learn best.

Henry Butler:

They're forced to acquire a different set of learning skills. They have internalized what they're learning probably more than most sighted kids. We did an informal test, an informal survey so to speak, and we discovered almost immediately with almost every blind student in that program that program they were able to concentrate more deeply than most sighted kids and they were able to focus more quickly than most of the sighted kids.

MUSIC: Blind Boys of Alabama, "Numberless are the World's Wonders" from Gospel at Colonus

Marash:

But what about second sight, that quality that Gospel at Colonus director Lee Breuer says he, and audiences, assume blind people have?

Lee Breuer:

I think that if you start to think about it, if you can't see, your hearing is doubled and tripled and your feeling is doubled and tripled and you're enormously sensitive to

energy and vibrations that's coming to the auditory system and basically through the skin. Working with the Blind Boys for 28 years now, I got to know something about this and how they work.

Marash:

Jimmy Carter of the Blind Boys of Alabama

Jimmy Carter:

Well I know that when you are deprived of a, of a sense, the other senses are more manifest. You can hear better, you can catch a vibration better. You do have a vision--it's just something that you have. When God takes a sense away from you he gives you the other four --you know He-- it's something that He enhances about that.

MUSIC: Larscene Turk, "Somewhere Around God's Throne"

Larscene Turk:

It makes sense from the perspective of those who look at or feel that a blind person has these "extra senses" if you will.

Marash:

Larscene Turk.

Larscene Turk:

But that isn't so. It's just that I have to use one sense more than you have to use that sense I listen for a whole a lot of things that you don't necessarily listen to. It doesn't mean that you can't hear them. But I depend on those for travel, etc. and you depend on your eyes. So, I have to train them to listen for those things I would have otherwise seen.

Valerie Capers:

Maybe because of literature, you know, and Shakespeare and the Greeks and all that business. They seem to give an additional--just that--second sight.

MUSIC Valerie Capers, “Jitterbug Waltz”

Marash:

Singer-pianist-composer Valerie Capers.

Valerie Capers:

They seem to think that we have a special kind of gift to our music which they are hoping they will recognize that gift when they hear it.

Henry Butler:

It may be true, it may not be. We really don't know.

Marash:

Henry Butler.

Henry Butler:

I say that line is based on sentimentality and if we think that people think that, we find a way to use that in a constructive way, so that everybody benefits.

MUSIC: Duke Ellington, “Come Sunday”

MUSIC: John C. Mellencamp, “John The Revelator”

Marash:

Today, after more than 200 years of American music and culture, our current favorite musics -- rock, pop, jazz, hip hop, Broadway and classical have all been tuned to the call and response, the rhythm and emotion of gospel. It's something the sighted and the blind can see and hear.

MUSIC: Kronos Quartet, “Dark Was the Night”

Marash:

You'll find photos, video, interviews and more—including a complete program playlist—at HeavenlySight.org. That's HeavenlySight.org.

Heavenly Sight –lost sight and found vision is an Artemis Media and Murray Street production – written and reported by Dave Marash.

Our producers –Steve Rathe, David Bailes, Kathie Farnell, Anita Merk, Alexa Lim, Matthew Long Middleton, and Margaret Bresnahan. Web design and production by Flyleaf Creative – Aleks Gryzcon, Ray Archie, and Tom Keenoy. Our Legal Counsel is Ernest T. Sanchez.

Our thanks to Lee Breuer and composer Bob Telson, the creators of The Gospel at Colonus, and David Bromberg, Henry Butler, Jimmy Carter, Jennifer Cutting, Eleanor Ellis, Ben Manilla and BMP Audio Productions, Rikki McKinney, and Margaret Pick.

Thanks also to our scholars and historians -- Doctors Richard Bailey, Valerie Capers David Evans, Joe Hickerson, M.Cay Holbrook, Jerma Jackson, Bernice Johnson Reagon, Kip Lornell, Terry Rowden --and Tonea Stewart, along with Kevin Nutt and Larscene Turk.

You can hear the music from this program and find our extended interviews at [Heavenly Sight dot org](http://HeavenlySight.org).

I'm Dave Marash.

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